

Stuart Murray: Church after Christendom

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Summary Alison Morgan Nov 08

Good book on the reshaping of the Church for mission after Christendom. A 'serious' read but full of good analysis. He's author of Post Christendom and an Anabaptist.

Prologue

Acts 11 and Peter's dream of eating unclean things – a paradigm shift. The term was coined by Thomas Kuhn in 1962; it was David Bosch who applied it to missiology.

I : Shape

1. Church after Christendom – belonging/believing/behaving

Some believe but don't belong, some belong before believing – lots, we know, since the Decade of Evangelism research which found people journey slowly to faith. What has prompted this shift? Postmodernity – suspicion of institutions, lack of understanding of the gospel. Many emerging churches practise belonging before believing. As Christendom unravelled, many still belonged out of loyalty/habit, but some no longer believed. So the decline has been slow. Many have now never belonged to church. Many see it as a firestation – glad it exists and grateful for its expertise in the event of a fire.. Some belong who believe only a part of what their churches teach. Some find belonging is no longer conducive to discipleship. Research shows belonging no longer implies the commitment it once did – fortnightly attendance instead of twice a Sunday. Begs the question: what level of belonging is needed to sustain incarnational discipleship in an alien culture? Some belong to several expressions of church; inevitable in a networking culture. Belonging before believing means we need process evangelism courses and revamped attractional strategies – but this is bound to be temporary; the supply of seekers will dry up.

Post Christendom converts will join counter-cultural communities with deviant values and beliefs, rooted in an unfamiliar story. We may need not so much 'process evangelism' as 'process discipleship' courses. It may be that people don't stop going because they stop believing, but rather stop believing because they stop going. Belonging before believing may persist; belonging without believing will disappear; believing without belonging will be unsustainable in post-Christendom because the culture is too different. 96% of British children are absent from church. The dechurched are 25% and shrinking, and the non-churched are 65% and growing.

Categories of alienation from church:

- The semichurched – some connection
- The dechurched
- The prechurched
- The postchurched
- Theantichurched

Churches and the 'set' model:

- The centred set model – belonging before believing, moving towards the centre
- The bounded set model – requiring beliefs and behaviour: Christendom as a culture was a bounded set; many evangelical/charismatic churches today are too
- The fuzzy set model – ill defined boundaries, flexible: allows people to belong whilst disbelieving many aspects of Christianity and behaving in ways more consistent with contemporary norms; many liberal churches are thus
- The open set model – no boundaries, no centre: inclusive but undisciplined

Behaving – we need countercultural churches that live out the attractive but provocative implications of the story they proclaim. Or an induction process, a new catechism, eg the Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Emmaus does it to some extent. Post Christendom catechesis will also need to explore the big story and core values of the new community, and may need to include forms of cultural exorcism confronting the norms of an alien culture. It will involve mentoring, apprenticeship, accountability.

We will need various categories of belonging, so we can travel in groups, committed to one another and to the journey, rather than to inherited definitions of institutional membership (Drane).

2. Church after Christendom: comings and goings

However we now interpret belonging, fewer people now belong to churches. Unless the situation changes, in Western culture there will *be* no church after Christendom. Some of us deny it – greater enthusiasm will prevail. Come wait for divine intervention. Some defend current structures and strategies – we just have to remain faithful. Some claim their church/denomination bucks the trend.

25% of churches grew in the 90s. Some denominations are holding their own. But many churches are losing members and ageing. In the 80s and 90s, 1.6m people joined churches but 2.8m left them. We need front and back door strategies – ways of encouraging more to join and fewer to leave. What makes them join/leave? [See Jamieson; and Richter/Francis, *Gone but not forgotten*].

The back door

2000 ppl leave churches every week in the UK. Some die or move away; but 1500 leave for other reasons. 1m Christians no longer belong to churches – this is the fastest growing part of the Christian community!

Postchurched people leave: because they've lost their faith; because church is no longer nurturing it; because they want to be sinful; because they find others hypocritical; because they've fallen out with people; because leaders have fallen or issues been covered up; because family/work/hobbies have taken over; because church offered no resources for life outside its subculture; because they couldn't handle divorce/bereavement etc and were pastorally unsupported; because they moved home and got out of the habit; to avoid burnout; out of discouragement at lack of growth.

Fanstone: people leave because of personal pain, difficulties with leaders, irrelevance of church, failing to encounter God. Richter/Francis: people leave because of loss of faith, changing values, burnout, disappointed expectations, family issues, stages of faith, changes and chances, and a lack of belonging.

Jamieson – the factor most church leaders fail to recognise is changing faith dynamics – a church no longer provides spiritual nourishment. Morris Stuart suggests people are disillusioned by the failure of their churches to engage radically with issues of social justice.

Many are just allowed to slip away unquestioned. Many are blamed, when we could learn from them; many are damaged but continue to grow; many join post-church groups. What kind of church would they rejoin? Ones where God is at the centre, where relationships are real, which are self-critical; which don't spoon feed; foster dialogue, welcome questions, affirm mystery, encourage doubt, do not place unrealistic demands on their members; engaging creatively with contemporary culture; equip members for the world of work; embrace a holistic understanding of mission.

The front door

Finney found that faith is a journey not an event, with relationships at the heart of it; and that guilt is rarely a motivating factor. Warren found that people come to faith through experience not doctrine; that decision moments are still important; that listening is essential. So Alpha offers food, friendship and dialogue – but it has snags (prescriptive). It may be a transitional approach pointing towards new models of evangelism yet to emerge.

What makes a church worth joining?

1. An earthed spirituality where people encounter God
2. Authentic friendships in a healthy community
3. Deep convictions but openness to doubt and question
4. Open edged and engaging with contemporary culture
5. Stimulating faith development at every stage on the journey

3. Church after Christendom: will it emerge?

Post-Christendom ecumenism will be different from the imposed hierarchical unity of Christendom. Church planting can now be seen as an expression of post-Christendom ecumenism. Having slowed down, it's now started up again, with 'emerging' churches – no central planning or coordination. Eg St Peter's, a barge moored in W India Dock. I-church, a diocesan web based church. Vaux, a response to being bored in church. 'In post Christendom, mission is a mindset before it is activities.'

Restructuring a church for mission happens in different ways – eg seeker-oriented church, purpose-driven church, cell church, minsters, clusters, café-style church.

Importing church into new places – workplace church, pub church, club culture church, café church, enterprise church (built round projects), cyber church.

Incarnating church into different cultures – network church, culture specific church, youth church, young adult church, children's church, church for marginalised groups, neighbourhood church

Churches shaped by Community engagement – midweek church, project church, 7 day a week church, post Alpha church

Churches shaped by community dynamics – table church, household church, base cell church, small Christian communities, organic church, post-church communities. Question – can these be sustainable and missionally effective or are they too small? Can you do transcendence round the supper table?

Worship-oriented emerging churches – alt.worship, culture-specific worship, customised worship

Customised worship – multi congregational church, menu church, multicultural church.

New monasticism

The significance of emerging church is not numerical – the numbers involved are limited, stories circulate, some fizzle out. Many are unadventurous in theology. But each has discovered something, and we do well to learn from it.

4. Church after Christendom – will it evolve?

Are emerging churches parasitic on inherited church? Can they sustain faith and discipleship beyond a single generation? Be missional? Maybe post-Christendom church will evolve as much as emerge? Cathedral attendance is growing – a yearning for mystery and transcendence rather than for informality? Many modernist churches are flourishing – but it may be a bit escapist? Robert Warren believes in the missional evolution of inherited churches – and we've seen a shift from pastoral to mission orientation. Inherited church has evolved many times before. Others (eg Moynagh, Frost/Hirsch) endorse emerging churches as the primary source of hope.

Postmodern churches may not be adequately equipped for post-Christendom. But emerging churches do highlight missional and ecclesial issues that churches after Christendom will need to confront. Maybe the way forward lies in partnership between evolving inherited and emerging churches – the mixed-economy approach. 'A mutually respectful relationship between emerging and inherited churches, involving open and patient dialogue, could produce a symbiotic partnership that offers greater hope for the future than isolation or competition.'

Robert Webber: 'it may be broadly said that the story of Christianity moves from a focus on mystery in the classical period, to institution in the medieval era, to individualism and the Reformation era, to reason in the modern era, and now, in the postmodern era, back to mystery'. 112

Leith Anderson: 'a conservative guess is that 98% of our behaviour is rooted in one tradition or another. Those who operate at the 99% level are considered to be the old-fashioned traditionalists, and those who operate at the 97% level are called avant-garde nontraditionalists. It is mostly a matter of degree', 112.

Are we looking for new ways of being church – or really just for new ways of doing church?

II. Ethos

What kind of church can survive? What aspects of church life can we rediscover in exile? The years spent in exile transformed the people of Israel, ridding them of tendencies and practices that had marred their community life and witness over many centuries. Key text: Ephesians 4.

5. Church after Christendom: Mission

An institutional church regards mission as one of its functions (not its defining centre); prioritises maintenance and designates mission to specialist agencies rather than equipping all members as missionaries; interprets its mission as confirming not challenging the status quo; expects everyone to speak its language and accept its norms; presumes authority and is discomforted when people choose not to belong, believe, behave in approved ways.

Three paradigm shifts are necessary to move us into effective post Christendom witness:

- 1. From maintenance to mission** – post Christendom churches need a missional ethos, expressed in their core values and nurtured in their corporate life (ie mission more important than meetings). New processes are necessary in order to bring this about: eg prayer, theological reflection on vocational, cultural and ethical issues; worship including outward looking elements from the world church, testimonies, contextual liturgy; talking about finance and identifying priorities.
- 2. From institution to movement** – Lambeth Pastoral Letter 1988 ‘we believe that the HS is now leading us to become a movement for mission’. Congregational action is insufficient; need to appoint pioneers to national roles, catalyse strategic church planting, close sick churches, spending half the budget on mission, monitoring progress. Training processes are key – appointing mission minded ministers, retraining old ones. Baptist Union attempted to recalibrate itself for mission in the 90s, and is no longer declining. AOG, MShCh and Salvation Army are taking similar initiatives.

How do we measure faithful membership – attendance at meetings, support for leaders, financial contribution?

Post Christendom church will need to move its operations from the centre to the margin. Much debate about the rise in spirituality – just white middle class Westerners? Temporary? Just an accessory not impacting people’s core beliefs? A private thing? Steve Bruce thinks it amounts to nothing, and secularity marches on. Others disagree. But it’s clear we should assume less knowledge of Christianity; anticipate longer journeys towards faith; allow others to set the agenda.

We need not an evangelistic but a missional strategy – process evangelism and seeker sensitive events are still invitational rather than incarnational. We should priorities dispersed strategies, living attractive Christian lives and sharing our faith ‘away from home’.

A teenager was fascinated by the ‘magic square’ on Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, in which many numerical combinations add up to 33. ‘Why 33?’ she asked. ‘Because Jesus died at that age.’ ‘That was young – what did he die of?’/ Walking into the cathedral she continued, ‘who’s that woman and why does she always have a baby?’ 159.

Morisey suggests for some behaving may stimulate believing and belonging – we have a way of life that works.

6. Church after Christendom: community

Building healthy, honest and harmonious communities is a prerequisite for effective mission. In the 80s we talked about growth, in the 90s about multiplication. We are shifting from ‘growth’ to ‘health’. But not enough – growth programmes do not look at the systemic sickness of many churches, or investigate the Christendom legacy – they just help relatively healthy churches become more attractive to those they already attract. Something more radical is needed. Many emerging churches also struggle to build healthy

communities – they can be uncritical of unhealthy tendencies in postmodern culture, and poorly sensitised to the toxic influence of Christendom.

Anabaptist course fit4life is good for building healthy churches – see <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/234>.

Church discipline is key to building healthy churches. Matt 18, Eph 4. Churches should not be unhealthily dependent on leaders – leaders are absent from Mt 18.15-17. Even Eph 4 has roles not leadership positions. Growth does not depend primarily on leaders. The most frequent charge from young people is one of controlling leadership. Leadership-dependent churches place great expectations on a leader – and few can live up to it. Brilliant and outstanding leaders are in short supply...

Other steps to a harmonious church – interactive learning (not reliance on monologue sermons), multivoiced worship (not a performance), reciprocal economics (not centralised tithing), empowering leadership (not disempowering clericalism).

7. Church after Christendom: worship

Post Christendom worship will embrace both diversity and unity. It will be both centred and decentred (who's leading?), creative and sustainable. Most churches design worship for existing members. How can churches integrate worship and daily life? many leave because Sundays doesn't relate to Mondays. In 321 Constantine made Sunday a day of rest, so Christians could worship – they'd previously met before or after work. But the disconnection was made.

Increasing numbers of Christians survive without attending Sunday worship – will they last? Thwaites argues we overemphasize church as congregation, at the expense of family, work and the world beyond the congregation.

Bad practices: stage managed performances (charismatic worship didn't start like this but often it has reverted); identifying worship with singing, with content which is banal or even erotic; elimination of pain, contemplation, lament, uncertainty in favour of constant upbeatness; loss of transcendence/mystery; bad long sermons; overemphasis on verbal at expense of visual, and on informality rather than ritual/symbolism; imprisonment within a subculture.

Key elements of worship: bible reading, praying psalms, corporate songs, peace, intercession, transcultural liturgy, communion.

8. Church after Christendom: simple and sustainable

Church after Christendom will not be uniform – cp Eph 4, locally and globally

The shape of Church after Christendom will be less significant than its ethos.

If church after Christendom is to be sustainable it will be simple – it needs mission, community, worship.

Church after Christendom will be a community that sustains hope.

Helpful questions:

- Need we pack each service with so many ingredients?
- How many sermons do we need – one a month, then reflection on it?
- Do we need to sing so many songs?
- Do we need extra meetings for church business?
- How many people need to be involved in institutional maintenance?
- What activities can we suspend when we run training courses and induction processes?
- Do denominations sustain churches or place unsustainable demands on them?

Our culture may not be post-commitment - it may just be inclined to express commitment differently. The commitment has to be rightly focussed – a clear vision and clear values. Commitment to an institutional status quo won't last.

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